

## **Auroville: A Utopian Paradox**

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### **Abstract**

Auroville is a small intentional community in South India with a population of around 2000 people. It started out as a utopian experiment in 1973 and today is a small close knit community engaging in sustainable practices. Like all other utopias that were celebrated around the same time, the vision for Auroville was dictated by a single individual. Auroville adheres to the larger universal ideal of utopia – non ownership of land, abolition of the power of money, centralized dining hall, rotational community work to avoid boredom, unending education etc, yet there are certain intricacies that are unique to this intentional community.

Through this paper, I would like to focus on the basic principles Auroville was laid out with, and today after forty years gauge its success or failure in realizing its utopian goals. All utopias are based on places and people, on striving to achieve perfection or a better world for humanity. Idealism is fundamental to any utopia yet the degree of its manifestation decides whether it is perceived as a utopia or almost on the verge of being labeled as a dystopic society.

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Just after the Partition (1947), when India was looking for a new direction on how to take charge of its political Independence, the mammoth task of arranging the administration of the country and its economy lay in front of the new Government. Two distinct cities were being shaped based on two very different ideas of urbanization. One was imposed by political will and one by voluntary service. One right above in the north, close to Delhi which was to be a new administrative capital of India to decongest Delhi, and provide identity to the State of Punjab which lost its Capital to Pakistan. Chandigarh (1951), so meticulously designed by Le Corbusier was to be this new ideal city, a forerunner to all future cities to be designed in India.

At the same time, further down South, on the borders between Pondicherry<sup>1</sup> and Chennai there was a reaction by a group of people who were looking for an alternative, more humane and peaceful Society. This was the birth of Auroville – the ‘City of Dawn’ which was envisaged by a French woman, Mirra Alfassa, (more commonly known as the Mother or La Mère), a disciple of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, and designed by a French Architect, Roger Anger (1923-2008).

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<sup>1</sup> Even though India gained Independence from the British in August 1947, Pondicherry was still under the jurisdiction of the French who ceded to India its full sovereignty only on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1962. It came to be administered as the Union Territory of Puducherry from July 1, 1963.

“Two world wars have devastated the earth. After each, first through the League of Nations and then through United Nations hopes of peace and harmony were raised only to be shattered again and again.”<sup>2</sup>“There has been a vast divide between the have and the have nots, between the Blacks and the Whites, the dissatisfied young and the conservative olds.”Auroville was to be a solution to escape the modern realities of the cold war.

On 28 February 1968, Mother founded Auroville. Representatives from 124 nations, placed soil from their home countries into an urn in a symbolic gesture which was then sealed and placed in the center of the town. The Charter of Auroville was read out in 16 different languages, beginning with French and English, followed by Tamil (the language of the local people), Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Tibetan<sup>3</sup>. Auroville was a town that belonged to “nobody in particular” but rather “to humanity as a whole”<sup>4</sup>. It is said that Auroville came to the Mother as a vision. She first mentioned it on 29<sup>th</sup> February 1956.<sup>5</sup> At a metaphysical level, Auroville was about collective living in a community in unity and harmony. The schools in Auroville were to be centers of unending education, allowing students to pursue subjects of their own choosing. It was to have a paperless economy, individual value given more importance than material wealth and social position. Land would belong to the community as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Physically, the city was conceived for 50,000 people. At its center was to be the symbolic Urn, A temple dedicated to the Mother (a much more universal concept of Mother Earth, not Mirra Alfassa) and an amphitheater in lush green environments to be used for community meditation sessions. It was not a religious place, there were to be no rules or rituals associated with it. The Master plan demarked a city area surrounding this, containing public buildings, and an outer ring(green belt). Auroville was to be structured into four zones: Cultural, Residential, Industrial and the International zone that was dedicated to pavilions from across the world to share their culture, knowledge and cuisine to the rest of Auroville.



Illustration 1: Auroville Zoning

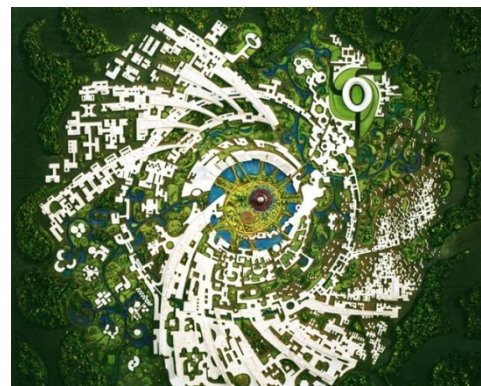


Illustration 2: Galaxy Master Plan, Line of Force with Matrimandir in the centre

<sup>2</sup> Auroville – The city the earth needs (Sri Aurobindo Society: India, 1973)

<sup>3</sup>“Auroville:28 February 1968”, Auroville Archives (Auroville, 1968)

<sup>4</sup>G.Alain, Auroville – A Dream Takes Shape (Auroville,2010)

<sup>5</sup>Auroville References in Mother’s Agenda (Sri Aurobindo Publication, n.d.)

<sup>6</sup>Auroville – The city the earth needs - (Sri Aurobindo Society: India, 1973)



Illustration 3: People gather in the Matrimandir amphitheater

In its hay day, Auroville received attention from all quarters. The third resolution on Auroville passed by the general assembly of UNESCO at its Paris session 1970(October- November) recognized Auroville in preparing and creating an instrument of education capable of meeting with the formidable demands linking the East and the West in a new relationship.<sup>7</sup>In 1970, the French magazine Marie-Claire declared Auroville the new “capital of a spiritual empire,”<sup>8</sup> and a year later the New York Times propelled the “utopian town in India built on a dream”<sup>9</sup>.

Roger Anger, the Chief Architect of Auroville, had visited Chandigarh and was highly critical of Corbusier’s work and believed its design was ignorant of the Indian culture and sensitivities. He said in an interview in 1972: “It is important that Auroville is constructed on the level of individual experience. You could say Auroville is at the opposite end of the tradition of contemporary urbanization where you create a city on paper...and then ask people to live there. Here the way ahead is just in the opposite direction. People are living the experience, and out of this experience they will create their personal circumstances, their surroundings, their way of life.”<sup>10</sup>

Today 2345 residents reside in Auroville coming from 49 different Nations, 42% of them being Indians, followed by French, German and Italian living in more than one hundred settlements.<sup>11</sup>The Project is largely endorsed by UNESCO and the Government of India and receives special privileges like tax exemptions. Individuals working here engage in collective endeavors, working in small groups on various projects such as land reclamation and reforestation, women’s rights, sustainable architecture and various commercial units.

<sup>7</sup>ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Auroville”, Marie- Claire, June 1970, p102

<sup>9</sup> Kasturi Rangan, “Utopian Town in India built on a dream”, New York Times, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1971

<sup>10</sup>Rundbrief Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Sommer 2010, 13 (Text translated into English by W.H.)

<sup>11</sup> According to a census dated May 2014

The effort of Auroville in many spheres of work cannot be challenged. The innovation of various ecofriendly techniques of construction, its research in organic farming, afforestation, its impact and the upliftment of the surrounding villages is commendable. Apart from its larger spiritual and philosophical goals which are open to constructive criticism, the immediate physical impact of this town can easily be measured.

The biggest success of this settlement has been its contribution to the ecology of the area - The conversion of inhospitable land with infertile soil, lack of ground water, uncultivated and salt water intrusions with only stretches of red desert in sight to a lush green forest with over a two million trees planted in three decades. Unfortunately this has resulted in private developers, eager to benefit from Auroville's growth and attraction to international visitors, exploiting the non-Auroville owned adjoining lands and turning them into resorts and retirement homes. In the last ten years the real estate prices within the Auroville township have increased by almost 500%. This is largely due to Auroville's close proximity to Pondicherry, one of India's fastest growing cities but also Auroville's development from a small community to a larger township.<sup>12</sup> Restaurants, guesthouses, massage centers and shops have mushroomed on Auroville's edge on essential pieces within the Green Belt which were reserved for environment conservation and water resource management. As stated by Dr. Karan Singh in his message to the Auroville community, "...every month that is lost means that the price of the land is rising and the dangers of commercial interest intruding into Auroville steadily growing...In the final analysis, if do not get the land we will not be able to build the city."<sup>13</sup> It is essential that Auroville purchases this land before further encroachment to join existing parcels of forest and organic community farms to fulfill its goal of self sufficiency in food supplies and harmony in bioregion within the area.<sup>14</sup>



Illustration 4: Auroville before afforestation



Illustration 5: Recent aerial shot showing extent of afforestation. Matrimandir in the centre

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.colaap.org/history-in-brief/>

<sup>13</sup> An extract from Dr. Karan Singh's message to Auroville community – March 2014

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.colaap.org/history-in-brief/>





Illustration 6: Creating a bund (water catchment) for rainwater



Illustration 7: Destruction during Cyclone

Auroville's framework encourages independence and community engagement is expected at an altogether different level. The fact that the town allows for innovation and freedom is a way other cities need to think of alternative practices of development for the future. Auroville, requires its residents to come together and contribute physically, ideologically and financially to build the kind of houses or communities they want to stay in, allowing each community to be different from other ideologically and architecturally thereby resulting in smaller communities that each have an unique identity and sense of belongingness lacked in cities where buildings are almost identity less and undistinguished, one from another. Here, I speak not of the large cultural or institutional buildings that are designed to be iconic in nature but here in Auroville, even the smallest of housing apartments have an identity to offer each unique from the rest. There is a complete reversal of the 'build and look for prospective tenant' model to coming together of likeminded people and then building. This reversed model affects the way architecture is visualized, created and built. Each project is about community building, economic viability and sustainability and not about profitability. The shackles of socially alienated cities where production is more important than culture and mobility more important than community interaction are broken.



Illustration 8: House in Vikas Community



Illustration 9: House in Samasti Community



Illustration 10: Rain water collection detail,  
Auromodele



Illustration 9: Meditation Space, Verite

For example in the case of a community called ‘Creativity’, there was a call for residents in Auroville’s weekly newsletter, News and Notes, inviting people who shared common ideals to become a part of the project. The Project’s Charter required no personal ownership of spaces and assets. All members have to take up community work such as Kitchen management, garden maintenance, social co-ordination etc, and share equally in rotational meal preparation. The community also desired ecofriendly construction that resulted in using hollow extruded terracotta roofing units, prefabricated to form high insulating low energy roofing systems, stabilized rammed earth etc. During the inception and construction of the project various meetings were held so the future residents would get to know each other.<sup>15</sup>



Illustration 12: Housing, Creativity



Illustration 13: Housing, Sadhana Forest

Another community, Sadhana Forest is a group of people who live together in units at the outskirts of Auroville that are powered by solar and human energy, practicing veganism and living an ecofriendly lifestyle including taking mud baths and composting toilets. Hence, the resultant architecture of their community is a result of their beliefs and practices.

The city also provides an alternative to migration to urban centers for the rural youth allowing them to stay in their villages yet reap the benefits of an urban lifestyle. Auroville has consciously taken initiatives to improve healthcare of the villagers, raise their standard of living through vocational training and self-employment, and providing education to rural children and provides employment to more than 5000 people. Auroville’s popularity as a tourist and spiritual destination has also benefited the villages, as most rent out a portion of their homes to students and volunteers of Auroville or set up small retail shops and restaurants, thereby earning extra income. The style of housing in these villages often depicts the models of housing in Auroville.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.aviusa.org/projects\\_creativity](http://www.aviusa.org/projects_creativity), accessed 27<sup>th</sup> July 2014



Auroville has largely changed the status of the local women in nearby villages and has played a major role in their empowerment. Seeing a woman clad in a sari from a small village on a motorbike speaks a lot of how this township has been able to have a positive cultural impact and triggered an upliftment of the people around in nearby villages. It has been able to alleviate their condition, almost as if bringing about a revolution in the mindset of typical male dominant rural villages of India, the very villages that are classified by the Tamil Nadu government as ‘the most backward areas and in need of development’ .

Beyond the Master Plan, the infrastructure, the urban systems and networks, and principles in this case that combine to form the urban fabric of any city, lies a very strong underlying force of the people that reside there, their interactions, engagement with and reactions to the city fabric primarily shape what the city becomes. It is this very layer that prevents Auroville from becoming the ideal Utopia it set out to become.

As the utopian dream become a reality, the tension between Auroville and the local people started even before its inauguration. Instead of an International Utopia, free from its colonial past, Auroville was slowly becoming a closed colony of foreigners and started to resemble a neocolonial settlement. A lot of villagers sold their land to Auroville only for the lure of money. But having just recently received freedom, there was fear of slavery once again. Most locals felt Aurovilians regarded them as ‘black, ugly and poor’.<sup>16</sup>Aurovilians disregarded Tamilians as ‘ancient’ while they were the ‘people of the future’ with a larger spiritual goal. The Westerners never regarded the locals as equals and the various cultural differences and colonial mindsets made it easy for them to abuse the Tamilians. As early as in 1975, The Times of India ran an article that spoke about the spirit of brotherhood of race existed only as a lip service and the foreigners were clearly exploiting the villagers to do the heavier, dirty work.<sup>17</sup>In fact, to date it is the very exploitation of the Tamilians as a labor force that allows Auroville to function as a community.

The relationship that the surrounding villages share with Auroville is complex and dynamic. The various socio-political forces at play here make the entire relationship contradictory. So, while the city did create employment for the neighboring villages, the jobs created were primarily blue collar jobs of construction workers, house helps and cooks. Auroville’s largest failure has been this disconnect with the local populace. While it had started as a project that would unite the East and the West, what it has really become is almost a small community of foreigners largely ignorant of their local neighbors. There have been various instances of local

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<sup>16</sup>Auroville Archives, Auroville, January 1974, 9.

<sup>17</sup> “Auroville: The end of a dream”, The Times of India , March 9, 1975, pg 9



Tamilians accusing Aurovillians for their neocolonist and racist attitude with the foreigners viewing them as submissive lower mortals. This segregation is also true of the Tamilian Aurovillians and can be largely observed at Solar Kitchen, which is a community dining hall serving up to a thousand lunches daily. The Kitchen has become a social space and many groups sit on the exact same tables week after week. These groupings often suggest how people interact with each other on a daily basis. As mentioned by Shanti Pillai, in her thesis, “Often when I casually inquired I found that the names of many of the Tamilians present were not even known to the other Aurovilians around. Moreover, often they were not even sure as to whether certain individuals were Aurovilians or guest workers.”<sup>18</sup>



Illustration 14: Solar Kitchen Dining Hall



Illustration 15: Locals prepare food in Solar Kitchen

The youth are the best critiques of Auroville because they do not see Auroville or Mother’s ideals as an experiment unlike the people who created it, but live it in today’s realities. Frustration is apparent as explained by a youth interviewed by Virya, ‘In Auroville, youth are not meant to exist and many residents seem to think that youth should just disappear.’ ‘The main issue is that the community has not accepted the youth as being part of it. They are despised or at best ignored by the community and seen as only bringing problems.’<sup>19</sup> Mother visualized the education system to be an eternal learning process, open ended, where each child could chose to learn what he wanted. Today, the youth of Auroville face pressures from all over - to be moral, ideal and altruistic because of their ‘Auroville brand’ but also to compete with their peers in the

<sup>18</sup> Pillai, Shanti. “Auroville: Philosophy, Performance and Power in an International Utopian Community in South India.” (PhD Diss. New York University, 2005)

<sup>19</sup> Virya, “Will the Youth be banned?”, Auroville Today, September 2005

rest of the world equipped only with an education system barely recognized by the rest of the world . Eventually, Most leave Auroville to other countries for studies and employment.

Another peril that is intrinsic to all small community clusters, where everybody knows everyone is small town gossip, rumors and petty politics. Every act of each individual is observed and can be blown out of proportion almost instantaneously. This has resulted in Aurovillians to keep up appearances and remain closed and form smaller circles thereby dividing the community. This becomes even more relevant in a town such as Auroville that speaks of larger 'Human Unity' and has a large number of spaces designed exclusively for human interactions and gatherings. This has politicized the entire atmosphere and until the recent past had created a situation where public controversies were expressed through newspapers and press. This also impacts the way the model of Auroville is to function. Like any other intentional community of this kind, Auroville too faces issues related to self-governance. When all decisions needs to be agreed upon by all residents who are constantly in conflict with each other, decision processes can become very slow and becomes the cause of stagnation.

After, Auroville's popularity declined, and it wasn't receiving funds or media coverage as before, it resorted to self-advertising itself. This was required for its survival to keep receiving funds but this has almost resulted in Auroville trying to brand an 'image' and keep up with it by not allowing others to see beneath it. It has used every possible mode of media, to project a positive image of it, justifying its actions in its newsletters, monthly papers and website and conceal any negative aspects. Living there for a few days, one can easily see the nature of this hypocritical branding. For instance, while it advertises itself as a settlement free of drugs, alcohol and other vices, the use of the same is profound in most parties and pubs on its outskirts are filled with the very same people. While its website preaches economic equality, and individual value over material wealth, it is a known fact that the affluent can choose where they want to live. A youth interviewed once said, "Making money is almost taboo...yet nobody listens to you if you don't have the money."<sup>20</sup>

Though Auroville has strived to develop on lines of a sustainable model with its low cost construction and green practices, the same cannot be said about its economic development. Auroville is not an economically sustainable model. It depends largely on grants by foreign donators and visitors, larger organizations such as the Government of India and the United Nations and personal contribution from people living in Auroville for its growth. While a large part of Auroville's economy is heavily dependent on visitors and their contribution (financially

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<sup>20</sup> Carissa Devine, 'Losing Faith in Faith', (SACAR, Pondicherry, August 2010)

and volunteer service), like Arcosanti, another similar intentional community, the residents no longer welcome the burden of living in a visitor attraction repeatedly reciting improvised scripts during guided tours.<sup>21</sup> As with Arcosanti one does wonder about the ethics of using volunteer students and even asking them to pay for the 'experience' or 'learning' while using their unpaid labor to achieve the utopian goals of the community. Unpaid volunteers constitute a large part of the labor force of Auroville, their work ranging from producing drawings in Architectural offices (most offices are solely run by unpaid interns), volunteering in farms, forests, gardens, animal care, teaching in schools, physically building eco friendly buildings through various overpriced workshops (adobe, rammed earth, bamboo), working for Auroville's media channels etc. Its commercial units cannot sustain its development. If Auroville stops receiving grants, development of the region will cease. As a solution to sustain their lifestyle here, some residents live part time in Auroville and go back to their home countries for a few months to earn money only to come back and spend it living in Auroville.

Just like Le Corbusier's vision of Utopian Chandigarh failed, so did Mother's ideal of Auroville, because both concepts largely ignored the forces of the very fabric that make up these cities and ignored the larger context in which they were placed. In effect, both saw their sites as 'tabula rasa' to realize their versions of utopia. While Corbusier almost completely ignored the very setting and the social nature of the community he was planning for, Mother's vision completely disregarded the fact that she was encouraging an affluent township of foreigners amidst poor villages who had been colonized by these very foreigners for centuries. She ignored the fact that the fulfillment of her utopia requires perfect people and people are not perfect. But, this also leads to a larger question of the ways in which cities are developed. Indian cities have always been organic in nature and their development cannot be ahistorical. It cannot be based on a set of rigid ideals or Master plans that completely ignore the site context and constraints but most need only catalysts and strategic interventions that encourage development rather than control it.

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<sup>21</sup> Malcom Miles, 'Urban Utopias, The built and social architectures of alternative settlements' (Routledge, London 2008) p186

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